SARAH GRIGG

BOLIVIA Gold

This is just an average dorado, but every fish landed is a treasure worth celebrating. Hooking and landing one of these razor-toothed, thickly armored fish in small, clear, freestone waters requires a stealthy approach, stout tackle, and a great deal of help from the local aboriginal tribes.

SPANIARD FRANCISCO DE ORELLANA WASN'T THE FIRST EUROPEAN TO EXPLORE THE BOLIVIAN JUNGLE. But when this curious soul sought river passage from Peru to the Atlantic in 1541, it did mark the first time a conquistador attempted that particular route.

The conquistadors were right—*there is trea sure hidden deep within the jungle*

BOLIVIA Gold

Dorado are considered powerful hunting partners because they corral sábalo into shallow water. Tribal hunters revere the golden dorado for this attribute because it allows them to harvest the sábalo with bow and arrow.

Photo RA Beattie

His party was nearly decimated by warriors at various points along the way. During one such encounter, Incan women pummeled the explorers with arrows, leaving their boats (and bodies) looking like porcupines. The Spaniards left standing thought these women were the Greek Amazons of mythology, naming the river "Las Amazonas."

The tale is a footnote in the development of Amazonian fly fishing. But if you're going to establish an angling destination that requires the support of indigenous Bolivians, you'd best know it. Mythology, it turns out, is at the heart of jungle angling.

After 515 years of contact with European settlers, the people of the Tsimané, Yuracaré, and Moxeño tribes—descendants of the Inca—are still nomads, hunters, and fishermen, living near the banks of the Amazon. Their mythology remains intact as well. Long ago, they say, there was a city of great riches located by a lake. So abundant were its treasures that, as an initiation rite, a tribal chief coated himself in gold dust and dove into the water, emerging as a shimmering god. This legend of El Dorado drove treasure-crazed conquistadors, who feverishly mapped the Amazon. Today, the legend lives in the golden dorado, the apex fish of the river revered as a god by local tribes, and increasingly, by fly fishers.

A God Among Fish

Argentine Marcelo Perez held a dual goal when stepping foot into the Bolivian Amazon in the 21st century: he sought a place for fishermen to ethically use protected areas, and to boost the profile of golden dorado within the international fly-fishing community. In a whirl of Latino indignation he told me, "People didn't know what a powerful fish it was. This shocked me, because a big dorado on the line is pure adrenaline."

Along with partner Rodrigo Salles, Perez founded Untamed Angling in the heart of this indigenous territory. Combining recreation, anthropology, biology, and business to create a destination angling economy, the operation marks an unfolding trend in the world of fly fishing. The result is an abrupt and welcome departure from traditional ecotourism models.

A Better Model

Since the 1980s, nonprofit and government groups in the developing world have experimented with resources management models engaging indigenous peoples, often called "community-based conservation." Classic models from North America and Europe too often divided people from nature. In the 20th century, command-and-control-models excluded aboriginal communities from projects run by Westerners who founded national parks and conducted ecological research in developing countries. Take for example, the designation of Serengeti National Park in 1954. Wildlife specials feature wildebeest migrating across unpeopled grasslands, narrated by a fuddy-duddy British accent woven with swooning violin strings. The more complex truth is, the founding of Serengeti displaced thousands of Masaai herders and, more or less, collapsed their pastoral economy.

The park designation aimed to protect wildlife, but pushed the Masaai culture onto an endangered species list of its own. Add inter-ethnic violence and a declining economy in the 21st century, and the Masaai—who traditionally revered elephants as beings with human souls—had no choice but to survive by whatever means possible, whether abetting ivory poaching or other forms of unsustainable harvest.

With community-based conservation, tribes partake in the management of resources and related recreational economies. In theory, if you give people a stake in the resource of interest, they will value it and ensure sustainable use. The concept of community-based conservation is as idealistic as it is innovative. Some programs have flourished. Some have withered. Some have come to a violent end. But the model continues to evolve, finding new forms in remote corners of the planet.

The Masaai built and today run Il Ngwesi Eco-Lodge and safari tours. Within Mongolia's Gobi Gurvan Saikhan National Park, The Nature Conservancy and park officials work with subsistence herders to sustainably graze livestock. American entrepreneur Gregory Carr funded the restoration of Mozambique's Gorongosa National Park through his nonprofit, a project heavily engaging locals.

Business in Bolivia

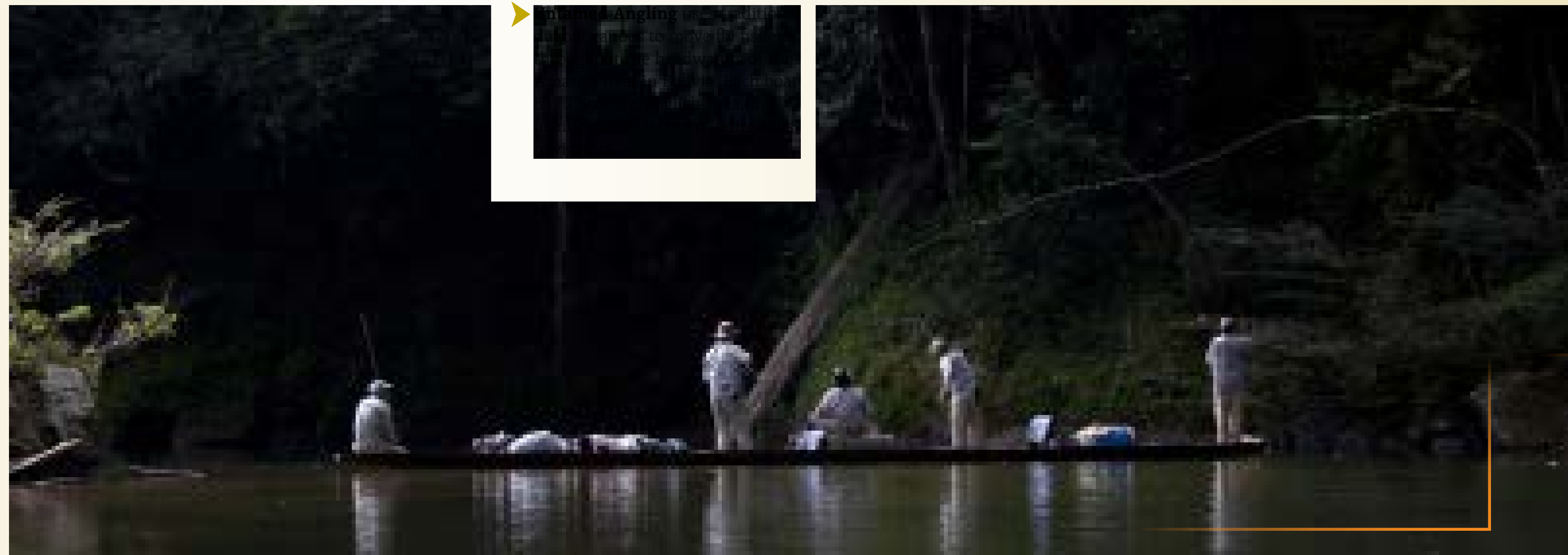
Bolivian President Evo Morales—a member of the Aymara tribe—is considered the first indigenous leader elected in the country's history. Tribal identity is strong and intact throughout the country, making it a ripe location for community-based models. How does this approach look when undertaken by privately funded, fly-fishing destination developers?

The Tsimané, Yuracaré, and Moxeño people live on land owned and managed by the Indian Association, Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory. There is no parallel land designation in the Global North, but it may be likened to a national park-meets-federal Indian reservation in the United States.

When Perez first investigated the region in 2006, he observed a rich fishery and a tribe with strong identity looking for its niche between traditional culture and the 21st century. For more than 500 years, the Indians' interaction with the outside world arrived in the form of colonial masters, missionaries, and drug runners. These outsiders arrived, introduced indentured servitude or religion or goods, and then disappeared. While they left their marks, for better or worse, the Tsimané have proven remarkably resistant and ambivalent to acculturation.

Today, new interests hover about the fringes. Deforestation, proposed highways, dams, mining, and oil exploitation threaten to degrade this fragile system and communities therein. Perez viewed fly fishing as a way to potentially mitigate some of these threats.

For three years, he met with chiefs



Untamed Angling uses traditional dugout canoes to move fly fishers throughout the headwaters of the Amazon river in Bolivia. Each boat has a Spanish/English-speaking fishing guide and two indigenous navigators.

Photo RA Beattie

and tribal organizations. Through extensive diplomatic process, he obtained long-term exclusivity to operate within the territory.

"The model is new and important. It took tremendous work to build. At the beginning, it was difficult. This is a high risk for us, the investors. The agreement is based solely on our ability to retain diplomatic relationships with the tribe. It has to be genuine," insists Perez, "because they can push you out whenever they feel like it."

They reached a deal in which communities own the land, lodges, and camps. Untamed Angling pays the concession fees and provides lodge accessories, fishing equipment, training, and international clientele. A fixed portion of each guest's stay goes to the tribe, the other to Untamed Angling. The income garnered by tribes funds community projects.

As part of the agreement, Untamed Angling must report to Colleción Boliviano de Fauna—the biological institute monitoring the territory—on the fishing management plan, garbage reports, energy and fuel consumption, and other details. The agreement also calls for catch-and-release-only for golden dorado and the sustainable harvest of other species.

One fishing operation cannot assuage every challenge these communities face; what it can do is provide a space to cultivate traditional and new skills. While some destination fishing lodges rely entirely on outside vendors, Untamed Angling's operations—Pluma and Asunta Lodges—lean on local services due to extreme isolation. Community members maintain the airstrip and the lodges. Some provide artisanal goods. Others act as angling trip canoe guides, taking clients on the water alongside Argentine fishing guides.

"Fishing is what they've done for thousands of years," Marcelo explains. "Because of their knowledge, we are seeing a new kind of angler, the jungle angler, combining a fly angler's technical knowledge with indigenous expertise. Their expertise improves the experience for the Western angler. They know things that we can never know, subtle signs and behaviors within the river and jungle environment that we are oblivious to. The jungles are disappearing. But there is a new breed of angler who is tapped into the old tradition of angling while extending reach into a new ecosystem, within a new tourism model."

Making the Film

Filmmakers RA Beattie and Jako Lucas—both of whom have fished the planet's most obscure corners—headed south to document the Bolivia program in early 2015, and the resulting film *Jungle Angler* is now on tour in the 2016 Fly Fishing Film Tour.

> We hiked up the Rio Negro as far as we could and cast to fish that had never seen a fly. These dorado were like T. rex, with hard skulls and razor teeth.

"The cool thing about fly fishing as an ecotourism operation is the awareness it brings with it," Beattie explains. "Is the small investment of a lodge going to save a place if you have a multimillion-dollar industry like mining proposing to use the same land and offering greater incentives? Quite possibly. Anglers are super-conscious of protecting places and rally to do so. Whenever you can bring fly fishers into a place, it's a bonus. There are lots of ecotourists, but anglers are really vocal."

The itinerary for this trip doesn't require the constitution of a conquistador, but does demand a willingness to follow a lightly traveled path. Visitors fly into Santa Cruz and overnight. From here, a puddle jumper delivers guests to a landing strip in the heart of the Amazon.

"It was a different location from what I'm accustomed to—the Seychelles with white sands and open flats," says Lucas, a native of South Africa. "We didn't have a clue where we were heading. You have to heighten your sense of awareness immediately."

The filmmakers forged an additional three days up the Rio Negro to fish, hauling filming and shooting equipment in dugout canoes, and hiking on foot.

"The further we went upstream, the more it was like Jurassic Park," recalls Lucas. "It's loud in the jungle, things are calling overhead and everything around you is moving. There were jaguar tracks everywhere. It was ominous to see heavy sign and never spot the cats. We hiked up the Negro as far as we could and cast to fish that had never seen a fly. These dorado were like T. rex, with hard skulls and razor teeth."

Dorado are highly mobile, requiring distinct habitats in which to breed and feed. The fish travel between these spots, covering up to 1,500 kilometers in their migration. Anglers must be closely attuned to these cycles in order to locate the fish, which is why the tribal knowledge involved in hunting them is so critical.

Adult dorado are piscivorous, feeding on catfish, bream, and sábalo, a staple fish for the tribes. Beattie explained the more practical reason for the tribal reverence of the dorado: "Beyond the 'Devil's Gold' tale, the Tsimané attribute mythological status to the dorado because they push sábalo into shallow water to trap and kill as part of their hunting behavior. Tribal hunters take advantage of this, harvesting the corralled sábalo with bow and arrow as the dorado feed around the fringes. The tribes revere the fish as a powerful hunting partner."

Lucas was awestruck by this aspect: "I'm not used to the viewpoint of fish as godlike. Across Africa and the Indian Ocean, fish are always a food source, harvested and consumed. The mythological aspect was something entirely unique about this fishery."

Other than baitfish, dorado also take small mammals, reptiles, and birds from the surface. There is no mistake when one eats a fly. Flies for dorado are built to withstand serious jaw pressure, sharp teeth, and aggressive runs. Once hooked, they go airborne.

Lucas echoed the accounts of those who have fought the notoriously feisty species: "Sight-fishing to a 30-pound golden dorado, you cast upstream and strip as fast as possible. They'll catch your streamer. You've gotta be 100 percent on the ball. The streams are small and narrow, as well as clear. So you have to be stealthy, which is tricky with all the line management. I set hard on one fish that just destroyed my fly. The hook came out, hit me in the shoulder, and created a massive bruise. That's how aggressive everything is with dorado."

Beattie agreed it was one of the most extreme environments in which he had fished: "If you could lay out all the experiences you could have worldwide, the jungle truly stands out. It's consistently wild. You are in the most extreme environment in terms of being in an ecosystem in which everything is trying to kill everything else. The fishing is intense. Your entire day is intense. It pushes you. There are land leeches, freshwater stingrays, vines evolved to snag with massive thorns.

"The sheer variety of life there is insane. That's how the fishery is.

BOLIVIA Gold

Photo RA Beattie

A heavy dorado is a team effort. Here, Rodrigo Salles (far left), Gabriel Gygax, Jako Lucas, and Marcelo Perez enjoy the camaraderie of jungle fishing.

You go to a fresh jungle like Bolivia and every square inch of the water is moving. The river biomass is so rich," he says. "A lot of the imagery we found compelling was on a really small scale. You can look at the top of the food chain—the jaguar, the dorado. Great subject matter. The ecosystem as a whole is more interesting than just the biggest predators. We really want to capture the system holistically within the film."

But filming didn't come without its challenges. "The humidity and the temperature were hard on the equipment. Setting up shots was a challenge because the rivers are narrow. Then, add this aggressive fish. You have to be ready at all times to capture images because everything happens in a split second with dorado and the jungle as a whole. This really puts the hunting prowess of the local people in perspective. They could pull out a bow and shoot something before we could even get the cameras ready."

Ready-to-eat food is not a luxury, so if dinner scampers or swims by, hunters are ready to take aim. Most fly fishers there will witness hunting action with their indigenous guides, and might get a lesson on shooting a fish with bow and arrow. A Tsimané quiver consists of three arrows for fish and small animals, a small, round thumper for small birds and mammals, and a single spear for large game. To use each effectively requires years of training. The skill and accuracy of hunters is uncanny.

"When filming a fishing documentary, we're often trying to capture the story as it unfolds. It's not always clear when we start an adventure what that story will be, but it became crystal clear to us that the local guides would be largely influential on the filming and subsequent tale," says Beattie. "Their ties to land and wildlife are a strong reminder of how far removed our culture is from nature, and what skill sets we've lost. Working with Amazonian tribes recalibrates our natural priorities."

Perez echoes this sentiment: "We don't have a past, a background for this kind of angling. Fly fishing has its customs and heroes. This might be a romantic idea. But our background is rooted in the Tsimané knowledge. Connecting to the jungle through fly fishing is possible because of them."

In spite of that newness, Untamed Angling is building three new projects in Brazil based on the same model, which so far, seems to offer a win-win for all involved.

"With the lodges in place, the tribe has a long-term investment. The Indians are proud of this project," Perez says. "It brings pride to their culture and knowledge. Young people were leaving the jungle communities for the cities, where they fell to the wayside. Some of them are coming back to work as guides, to come back to what they have known for generations."

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